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# **Geopolitics and family in Palestine**

## **Abstract**

This paper questions Geographers ability to think about power and violence through different epistemological registers, specifically by examining the discursive production of Palestine as place in geopolitical studies. Although the banner of geopolitics groups together a variety of approaches, these studies more or less cohere around a very particular type of imaginative geography of place – as violent and Political. Recent arguments for cosmopolitan approaches to place – particularly when encountering non-Euro/American sites – are used to argue for more diverse approaches to places such as Palestine within Anglophone geographical scholarship. Using research on Palestinian family spaces and spacings, an alternative approach is outlined that exposes some geographies of dealing with and getting by the Israeli Occupation that are largely ignored by geopolitical approaches. These tropes prompt a return, in the conclusion, to the question of how geographers analytically apprehend power and violence, and the possibilities for doing this at the limits of, and beyond, the framework of geopolitical analysis.

## **Introduction**

Over the last ten years, Palestine and Palestinians have become an increasingly popular topic in/for Anglophone geographical analysis. The temporality of this interest roughly coincides with the beginning of the second Palestinian *intifada* (uprising, literally: ‘shaking off’), the 2001 September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in the US and subsequent US-led ‘war on terror’, and broader scholarly interest in a whole series of violent geographies (see for example Gregory & Pred 2007). It is therefore not surprising that geopolitics – a term I use rather loosely to group together a whole series of approaches including classical, critical, feminist, urban and neoliberal geopolitics – has been an important epistemological register for analyzing some of these geographies. As I will outline in the next section, this is particularly the case with regards to Palestine (or as it is frequently conceived in geopolitical studies, Israel/Palestine).

If classical geopolitics can be conceptualized as the realist study of the geographical basis of statecraft and politics with an eye to policy recommendations (Sparke 2009, Dalby 2008), then critical geopolitics might be thought of as the study of the geographical imaginations and cultures underpinning the discourses and practices from which state, and increasingly other forms of power, emerge (Sparke 2009, O' Tuathail 2009). More recent geopolitical analyses have extended the ethos of critical geopolitics under a series of different headings. Hyndman (2004: 309) has argued for more feminist geopolitical studies that are distinguished from critical geopolitics 'by adding a potentially reconstructive political dimension' (see also Hyndman 2001, 2007, Dowler & Sharp 2001, Secor 2001), and similar arguments have been made about the need for a more normative dimension within critical geopolitics itself (Megoran 2008). Roberts et al (2003) have argued that a neoliberal geopolitics is needed to understand contemporary political geographies in light of neoliberalism and globalization, while Cowen & Smith (2009: 24) argue that 'contemporary shifts in the spatialization of political, economic and social power... lead beyond geopolitics', and thus are better captured by a geo-economic conception of space. Dalby (2008: 415) argues that it is possible to use these varied approaches to inform critical geopolitical scholarship, rather than displacing it. Despite the many intricate differences in these approaches, all of them remained linked by their analysis of geographical basis of politics across a series of spatial and temporal extents. Nevertheless, critical geopolitics remains a subject area that is hard to clearly delineate.

We should resist temptations to delimit critical geopolitics by subject matter, theoretical concerns or methodology. Such limitations would create an illusion of internal coherence and external differentiation that this work does not possess or claim (Kuus forthcoming: n.p.).

Critical geopolitics is no more than a general gathering place for various critiques of the multiple, geopolitical discourses and practices that characterize modernity (O Tuathail 2010: n.p.)

In the spirit of recognizing and working with the plural and contested nature of geopolitical scholarship (critical, feminist, neoliberal and otherwise) as a loosely organized sub-discipline, this paper will both recognize the role such work can play in analyzing Palestinian space and, in keeping with the theme of this special issue, offer an alternative approach to envisioning and encountering Palestine. The paper begins with an examination of how Palestine has been produced by a range of geopolitical analyses. I argue that Palestine is frequently apprehended by geographers through the epistemological lens of geopolitics (of various kinds), and that the *collective* effect of such studies is to create a rather singular ontological representation of Palestine. Palestine becomes stereotyped as a place of violence and suffering, and in this process Palestinians themselves can become discursively erased as active subjects.

Some more recent studies that envision Palestine in different ways are then reviewed. Crucially, these studies don't ignore the violence of occupation, but rather seek to foreground more prosaic practices of dealing with it or simply 'getting by' (Allen 2008, Hammami 2004). In this paper I seek to contribute to and develop these alternative approaches by drawing on eleven months of ethnographic research in the village of Birzeit. In particular I explore the family practice(s) of living in the Spanish Apartments, an apartment building in Birzeit. While the family can be conceived of geopolitically, the set of intimate cultural, economic and social geographies that I foreground leads instead to a broadening of the grounds on which politics is encountered and apprehended in Palestine. I use these insights to reflect on some of the politics and practices that circulate around critical geopolitical representations of 'other' spaces, and our ability (as geographers) to think about power and violence through different epistemological registers.

## **Geopolitics, Stereotypes and Palestine/Israel**

There have been a significant number of geopolitical studies that have helped elucidate the relations between power and space, politics and geography in Palestine, particularly with regards to Israeli colonization and occupation. Geopolitical analyses of Palestine have produced a series of insights about the geographies of territory, borders and

power/knowledge. However, such studies, through the repetition of tropes of violence and politics, work at a *collective* level to produce – albeit unintentionally and unknowingly – a stereotypical representation of place. In other words, geopolitical studies of Palestine are one of many forms of Western scholarship in which ‘different places come to stand in, stereotypically, for certain kinds of events or processes’ (Robinson 2003: 279). In order to flesh out this argument, I begin by arguing that geographical studies of Palestine(/Israel) cohere around two particular themes.

The first theme that has been extensively explored in this context is territory and borders. This includes work that has traced the shifting production of different territories and boundaries that constitute Palestine and Israel. (Falah 1997, 2003, 2004, 2005, Falah & Newman 1996, Newman 1996, 1997, 2001, 2002, Reuveny 2003). Some of this work has also produced a series of statements about state formation that seek to address politicians, negotiators and diplomats, very much in the mould of what I have referred to above as classical geopolitics (Falah 1996, Falah & Newman 1995, Newman & Falah 1997, Arab World Geographer 2005). More recent work on territory has been attentive to the ways in which the everyday practices (particularly those of the Israeli Occupation) have produced Palestinian territories. Such work includes studies of land seizure and displacement (Falah 2003, 2004, 2005, Zureik 2003), the destruction of Palestinian cities and built environment (Falah 1996, Graham 2002, 2004, Abujidi & Verschur 2006), the construction of Israeli settlement-colonies in the Occupied Territories (Halper 2000, Weizman 2004, 2007, Campbell 2004, Zureik 2003) and the role surveillance and mobility play in striating these territories (Halper 2000, Harker 2009a, Parsons & Salter 2008, Weizman 2007, Zureik 2001). There have also been studies of a similar ilk conducted in Palestinian spaces in Israel (Yiftachel 1991, 2002, 2006; Yiftachel & Ghanem 2005) and other territories of Palestinian exile such as Lebanon (Ramadan 2009). This work on territories and borders has helped to explain the ways in which Palestinian spaces (national, municipal) are produced, and the constitutive role played in these productions by different Israeli actors, and depending on the context, other Arab actors too. Such work has generated more general insights about how particular states are performed and how boundaries are produced, reproduced and disrupted.

Geopolitical work on Palestinian territories has also been instrumental in unpacking the contorted topologies of power/knowledge embodied in such spatial formations. This second thematic includes studies that have explored the discursive construction of both Palestine (Gregory 2004, Weizman 2007, Gordon 2008), and Palestinians (Jamoul 2004, Long 2006, Ramadan 2009, Bhungalia 2010), and how these interconnected discursive constructions are entangled with a range of material practices that have devastating consequences for the spaces and bodies that they enroll and act upon (e.g. the destruction of Palestinian built environment). These studies bear a strong resemblance to Kuus' (forthcoming) mandate for critical geopolitics: 'to illuminate and explain the practices by which political actors spatialize international politics and represent it as a "world" characterized by particular types of places'. Many in fact stretch this definition by extending the term 'political actors' beyond the realm of statesman and militants. For instance in Weizman's (2007) work, the performative spacings of the Israeli Occupation are enacted by subjects such as architects, planners and economists. Bhungalia (2010) also makes the salient point that the geopolitical scriptings employed by the Israeli military and politicians exclude Palestinian 'terrorists' and 'civilians' from the realm of politics (and political actors).

By recentering the analytic gaze from up on high to within embodied individuals, this group of studies has produced more variegated understandings of spatialized power in the Occupied Territories (e.g. Gregory 2004, Long 2006, Weizman 2007, Bhungalia 2010). However despite this, politics and violence, whether military, bureaucratic or state-based, provides a common basis for geopolitical studies of Palestine(/Israel). This is hardly surprising, given the intense vulnerabilities many Palestinians experience while living in (and moving between) the Occupied Territories, the state of Israel and the manifold spaces of exile. In fact, it would be negligent and/or naïve to ignore such relations. This is certainly not my intention here. What I do want to caution against is a relatively consistent analytical focus that envisions and 'knows' Palestine as a place of politics, conflict and violence. To clarify my argument once more: while many individual studies

do move beyond these foci, the reiteration of particular tropes at *collective* level creates stereotypes.

While this is an epistemological critique, it also has ontological implications. As critical geopolitics has clearly shown, particular representations of space actively participate in socio-material ‘fabrications’ that have devastating consequences (Gregory 2004). In the context of Palestine, epistemologies of politics and violence actively participate in the re-creation of spaces where Palestinians often have little agency (Bhungalia 2010).

Weizman’s (2007) study of Israel’s Occupation provides the clearest example of this problem. While the Israeli Occupation is the explicit focus of his work, the spaces in which Weizman’s analysis moves are nevertheless Palestinian (too). However, the occupied are a derivative, of both the occupation and more importantly for my argument here, of Weizman’s analysis. Put differently, in exploring how Israel creates a land hollowed out of its Palestinian inhabitants, Weizman does much the same thing himself rhetorically. His analysis of the ontology of occupation bleeds into and comes to define an epistemology of Palestinian life.

Weizman’s work demonstrates how an ontological axiom of uneven power relations between Palestinians and their various ‘others’ (Israeli, Lebanese, Jordanian, etc), and the multiple vulnerabilities they experience as a consequence, is translated into an epistemological axiom that dictates Palestinians can only be apprehended through politics and violence (and frequently as largely passive victims to such processes). This tacit consensus, which I argue subsists in Geography because of the sheer number of geopolitical studies of Palestine, can unintentionally reinforce inequitable power relations at a discursive level, and create one-dimensional representations of Palestine and Palestinians. This is problematic not only because it leads to the production of stereotypes (Palestinian as victim of occupation, or on the other side of the same coin, as hero of resistance), but also because it obscures a whole series of other social performances and time-spaces. However, this epistemological consistency is, like any other, an achievement and thus liable to disruption. In the rest of this paper I seek to enact such a disruption in order to complicate representations of some of the Palestinians I have spent time with in

the West Bank, whose lives (and spaces) are far richer than many geopolitical accountings and, indeed, even this disruption.

## **Different epistemological registers**

Given the representational hegemony that I have argued is rooted in and routed through geopolitical studies of Palestine, how might it be possible to move beyond this epistemological axiom? O' Tuathail (1996) has proposed an anti-geopolitical eye as a way of resisting particular hegemonic geopolitical gazes. I read O' Tuathail's anti-geopolitical eye as a deconstructive approach to geopolitics, which seeks to undo hegemonic geopolitical discourses from within. Hence, any resultant scriptings of space still remain within the orbit of geopolitical discourse, which in the context of Palestine still turns around politics and violence. To counteract the tendency towards stereotypical representations of place, Robinson (2003: 279) suggests that what is needed instead is a method for 'learning from the complex and rich experiences and scholarship of different places'. In this vein, I am interested in an expanded geography of Palestine that works at the limits of and goes beyond geopolitics. Such a geography does not reject geopolitics as a mode of analysis, but rather seeks to situate it more modestly within an expanded field of intellectual and political endeavours concerned with the power-infused spaces and spacings of Palestine. Therefore such an approach does not seek to ignore or downplay the role of violence and particular types of political process in Palestinian lives. Rather, it endeavours to situate and link such processes within a broader array of geographies.

This argument is similar to Taraki's (2006), who underscores the need for contextualizing any work in Palestine within the ongoing Israeli occupation, while also calling for more sustained work in the social and cultural realm.

The political reality must be the basic backdrop against which we examine the routines of life and the small dramas of daily life. (Taraki 2006: xii)

A preoccupation with Palestinian political economy and political institutions has precluded a serious study of social and cultural issues. (Ibid: xxvii)



Taraki's argument is part of a broader current of scholarship seeking to expand the conceptual terrain on which Palestine is encountered (see also Stein & Swedenburg 2004, Hammami 2004, 2006, Allen 2008, Kelly 2008). Much of this work lies outside the disciplinary boundaries of Geography, but it is underpinned by an attentiveness to spatial relations. While many non-geographical studies of Palestine and Palestinians have a spatial basis (given the importance of land and territory to Palestinian experiences), what distinguishes the studies gestured to above is the complex ways in which they analyze space as a site of power and social transformation. In what follows, I use the pluralizing ethos that can be discerned in these studies as inspiration for my own attempt to think Palestine at the limits of and beyond geopolitics. In situating my work alongside these studies, like Taraki I want to use a social-cultural analytical register to work towards a more complex set of Palestinian geographies. I therefore turn to some of the specific family spaces and spacings that emerged during my research in Birzeit.

## **Geographies of family**

During the eleven months I spent in Birzeit, a village just north of Ramallah in the centre of the West Bank, the family and families emerged as important factors in my research. My initial interests in homes, mobilities and place frequently weaved in and out of familial relations. For instance, when I discussed issues around im/mobility with students at Birzeit University, the family was one of the most common motivations for what were often very difficult journeys around the West Bank (Harker 2009a). When I asked research participants what the word home evoked, I was repeatedly told things like:

I look at home as the place I was born in, and the place that I have family in. It will always connect me to my brothers and sisters. When there are holidays or some religious occasions, we all go to that house and meet again.

(Interview with Samir, an English Language student, at Birzeit University, 19th April 2006; interview conducted in English).

A place where you combine family [ *'a'ila*] and comfort.

(Interview with Moussa, an engineer, in Birzeit, 25th June 2006; interview conducted in Arabic).

Family, being close to family, and having your own home.

(Interview with Rula, a university employee, at Birzeit University, 21<sup>st</sup> February 2006; interview conducted in English).<sup>1</sup>

These responses underscore three observations that emerged through participant observation. Firstly, there is more to life in the West Bank than the Israeli Occupation, something that became increasingly clear to me during my eleven months in Birzeit. Secondly, the Israeli Occupation is nevertheless a very powerful force in spacing the lives of Palestinians living there (and indeed, elsewhere in world too). Thirdly, families and familial spaces are frequently means of dealing with the Israeli Occupation. I use the term dealing with here to refer to practices and relations that must encounter, and quite literally ‘deal with’ more hegemonic power relations (e.g. the Israeli Occupation), but aren’t explicitly forms of resistance to those power relations. In order to further explore how this concept works with regards to families and family spaces in Palestine, it is first necessary to unpack the concept of family itself. The discussion that follows is quite extensive, because as will be made clear, there is relatively little work within Geography that theorizes the family.

The importance of family in my research presented quite a challenge for me because, as Valentine (2008: 2098) has recently noted, the family is an ‘absent presence’ in geographical research. While forming the backdrop to many geographical studies, familial relations are rarely the subject of much attention in and of themselves. For instance, in economic geographies families are frequently aggregated to household level income (e.g. Leinbach et al 1992, Moran et al 1996). Valentine (2008: 2100-1) notes how more recent feminist work on social reproduction focuses on ‘the practical organisation of care rather than on the emotional ties, the meaning and quality of relationships, and the “doing” of intimacy within “families” defined more broadly’. Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup> All interviewees have been assigned pseudonyms. On defining home, see Harker 2009b.

Little or no consideration has been given by geographers to other forms of familial relationship beyond parent/child: for example, between: adult children and their adult parents; siblings; grandchildren and grandparents; and wider familial networks of aunts/uncles, cousins and step children/stepparents. This relative absence is particularly significant in the context of growing numbers of fragmented and reconstituted families or intra-familial negotiations across multiple generations. (Ibid: 2101).

This lacuna in geographical research becomes even more notable when compared with the extensive work that has been done to theorize familial relations in other academic disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, history and critical legal studies. Such work has examined how familial relations emerge from a variety of processes, which I group heuristically into *discursive* constructions of the family and family *practices*, although these overlap and bleed into one another<sup>2</sup>.

Discursive constructions of familial relations produce ‘the family’, a set of statements about what a family is and how it should be done within a specific spatial and temporal context, (see examples in the work of Foucault 1978, Ong 1999). As Gillis’ (1996: xv) phrase, ‘the imagined families we live by’ suggests, discursive constructions have powerful material effects. These can include creating a ‘model’ nuclear family (Oswin 2010), and constituting domestic and foreign policies (Cowen & Gilbert 2007) and legal regimes (Martin forthcoming) that are highly exclusionary. Sherif-Trask (2006) has also recently noted how particular discourses of *the* Arab, Islamic and/or Oriental family (often used interchangeably) underpin orientalist epistemologies of Arabic and Muslim societies and spaces. Joseph’s (1993, 1999a, 1999b) work on ‘patriarchal connectivity’ in Lebanon stands as one of the few examples of work in an Arab world context that *critically* explores how normative discourses of the family are (re)produced.

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<sup>2</sup> For a more extensive discussion see Harker forthcoming.

In many of the studies cited in the previous paragraph, discourses of family become blurred with family practices. Morgan (1996, 1999) develops the concept of family practices to analytically encircle the dynamic and active ways in which different families perform themselves in different social contexts. This approach treats family as a verb rather than a noun, a set of relations that are routinely ‘done’ in situated contexts. Morgan’s work is also an explicit response to the ways in which family remains a meaningful and important concept despite the declining numbers of heteronormative two-parent families (in the implicitly British-Western context from which he writes). Subsequent work has extended the concept of family practices to explore sibling relations (Edwards et al 2006) and family spaces (Seymour 2007). Finch (2007) has argued for the importance of ‘display(s)’. She argues that family practices must be recognized as such by others and by families themselves to be meaningful. In other words, family practices take place amidst a range of family discourses that allow for such practices to be made meaningful (as *family* practices). Her argument returns us to the intersection and entwinement of family practices and discourses.

Following this work, I argue that family is a concept with interwoven discursive and non-discursive performative dimensions. While families are differently practiced in particular contexts, these contexts are shaped by more extensive familial discourses that in turn are extended, reiterated and rejected through embodied practices. Families can therefore be thought about as dynamic and more or less precarious achievements in time-space. This proposed concept of family is inherently geographical. In order to recognize the importance of space in discursively infused practices of family, I use the concepts **family spaces**: the temporal-spatial formations, relations and flows that are manifest by families, and **family spacings**: the processes through which family spaces emerge. While in practice these spaces and spacings are mutually constitutive, this conceptual separation allows for discussion of the processual nature of families (family as verb) alongside the more commonplace understanding of family as a noun (see Harker forthcoming).

There are two other aspects to theorizing family that are implicit in my discussion of families as discursively-infused temporal-spatial performances. Firstly, families are

resolutely material. Materiality here encompasses different assemblages of human and non-human bodies. While the human bodies that comprise families may vary across a range of ages (generations), genders, sexualities and ethnicities, they are also augmented by non-human relations such as dwelling spaces (e.g. houses), identity documents (e.g. birth certificates, passports), communication technologies (e.g. mobile telephones), domestic objects (e.g. televisions) and much else beside (see for instance Sheller's (2004) work on cars, and Power's (2008) on dogs as family members). Secondly, families are resolutely social and affective. They are collective (more than individual) subjectivities emerging from specific social dis/connections, affective flows and emotional ties, and thus form part of a more extensive set of geographies of intimacy (Valentine 2008) and relatedness (Nash 2005). In the next section, I want to put this understanding of families to work in the context of my research in Birzeit in order to start to understand how Palestinian families deal with and get by the Israeli Occupation. I argue that such an approach offers a means through which geopolitical studies can be more attentive to everyday realities, while also producing Palestine as place in a way that extends and moves away from some of the geopolitical conceptualization of Palestine with which I began this essay.

## **Living in the Spanish Apartments**

In Birzeit and Palestine more generally, family is predominantly conceptualized and practiced as *'a'ila* and *hamula*. *'a'ila*, the 'small' or nuclear family, is normatively produced as father, mother and plural children. The *'a'ila* is complemented by *hamula* (sing. *hama'il*), the 'big' family or clan, which is normatively produced as countless cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews. Birzeit currently consists of six *hamula*. These definitions of family (thought of more precisely as fairly enduring discursive achievements) are not only based on composition, but also rooted in particular spatial arrangements. In Birzeit, as elsewhere in Palestine (Amiry & Tamari 1989), families often live close together. Johnson's (2006: 92) survey data suggests that over 50% of people in the central West Bank (where Birzeit is located) live in apartments or attached dwellings that they share with relatives. These numbers increase to over 90% in southern West Bank and 80% in Gaza.

This close association of living space with family space in the Occupied Territories has a particular historical lineage. Landowning families (*hamula*) were prominent social and economic players in the Ottoman era Levant (Kimmerling & Migdal 2003). Between 1948 and 1967, when Jordan controlled the West Bank, *hamula* identification was promoted as a means of suppressing Palestinian nationalism (Hilal 2006, Gordon 2008). The Israeli Occupation continued this practice when it invaded the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967. Village Leagues were created in 1978, a form of spatial governance that invested family (*hamula*) heads with some, albeit limited powers. Although largely unsuccessful as a means of suppressing nationalism, the Village Leagues remained formally in effect until the first *intifada* in 1987 (Gordon 2008). Hence, even within a context of emerging nationalism, these (geo)political strategies by different occupying powers ensured that families (*hamula*) were important nodes of social belonging. The increasing fragmentation of Palestinian space in the West Bank after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993<sup>3</sup>, which has intensified since the outbreak of the second *intifada* in 2000, has produced renewed forms of local practice and localism (Johnson 2006: 54) that enable, and often necessitate continued close association between family spaces and living spaces. This brief historical sketch also highlights the connections that exist between the geopolitical practices of states and discursive constructions of the family that bleed into everyday family practices, although more detailed historical work would be needed to fully substantiate this argument in this context.

The process of territorial fragmentation described in the previous paragraph has also significantly contributed to increasing spatial and social heterogeneity within the Occupied Territories (Taraki & Giacaman 2006). One example of this is the (statistical) differences between the central West Bank (where 50% of people live in apartments or attached dwellings that they share with relatives) and the southern West Bank (90%). In

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<sup>3</sup> The Oslo Accords divided the Occupied West Bank into three areas: Areas A (18% of the territory), B (22 % of the territory) and C (the remaining 60% of the territory), all divided by checkpoints, roadblocks and closures that are policed by the Israeli Occupation Forces. While the Accords nominally offered Palestinians administrative control in areas A and B, and ‘security’ control in area A, Israel continued to control water aquifers below ground, the electromagnetic spectrum above ground, and circulation and flow between all three areas, ensuring a de facto control of all areas and a continuation of the Occupation, albeit by slightly different means. (see Kimmerling & Migdal 2003, Weizman 2007, Gordon 2008).

the central West Bank, Ramallah and its hinterland (of which Birzeit is a part) is becoming increasingly distinct, due to the concentration of political and economic power there, while other West Bank cities face increasingly harsh closures (Taraki & Giacaman 2006, Abourahme 2009). This has caused, inter alia, a large number of working aged men to migrate to Ramallah from other parts of the West Bank, which in turn has reduced the overall proportion of people living with their family in the central West Bank. Birzeit itself is also quite distinct with regards to the coincidence of family spaces and living spaces. The presence of Birzeit University, and thus large amounts of student accommodation in the village, mean that fewer people residing in the village live with their families than in other parts of Palestine.

In addition to this generally strong, albeit variegated, connection between family and dwelling space in Palestine, family space is understood in quite specific ways materially. In the past, members of the same *hamula* would often build adjoining houses that formed ‘family’ courtyards (Amiry & Tamari 1989), as can be seen in Birzeit’s Old City [*medina qadima*]<sup>4</sup>. Currently, the material dwellings in which families live together often take the form of multi-storey buildings, in which parents and (adult) brothers each live with their families on separate floors. Often construction is accomplished in piece-meal fashion, and additional floors are added over a number of years as finance resources become available. This shift from horizontal to vertical living offers a cheaper means of construction, since residents can build on land that is already owned without the need to buy more. While this transition is the result of a number of factors, including the use of cement that is strong enough to bear the load of these increasing number of floors, perhaps two of the most significant dynamics in the West Bank have been the rapidly increasing Palestinian population (Kanaaneh 2002) and decreasing amounts of living space for this population as Israel continues to colonize the Occupied Territories<sup>5</sup>. As a result, there is less land for parents to bequeath to offspring, and the cost of purchasing

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<sup>4</sup> This is discussed in much greater detail in Harker (2009b).

<sup>5</sup> Similar dynamics (increasing population, declining space) have been noted among Palestinian populations within Israel (King-Irani 2007) and in Lebanon (Martin 2010).

land has risen sharply<sup>6</sup>. Hence, indirectly, these material spaces of family are also entwined with particular colonial practices and their consequences.

One example of a contemporary family space in Birzeit that embodies this broader social-spatial norm is the house in which Waleed, the subject of the case study that follows, was born and raised in.

Waleed: My father has a house and so does my grandfather. Now they live with all my uncles. They all live together. Everyone has a small flat, with two bedrooms, one kitchen and one bathroom... My parents live with my brothers and sisters. Upstairs my uncle lives with my grandmother, three kids and his wife. Another uncle lives with four children and his wife. Downstairs another uncle lives with his three kids and wife. And upstairs, another uncle has two sons.

However, Waleed himself lives in a building called the Spanish Apartments, and has done so since his marriage in 2000. When I talked with him in August 2006, he had two children and his wife was expecting another one. The Spanish Apartments, also built in 2000, are a series of five apartment buildings, constructed by the local Catholic Church in Birzeit using money from Spanish donors. They were built with the specific purpose of housing young Christian families, something I discuss further in the next section. The construction of these apartment buildings fits within broader shifts from horizontal to vertical living. However, in a context in which sharing a home space is itself a well-rehearsed family practice (where family is understood as both *'a'ila* and *hamula*), Waleed lives with just his wife and children, surrounded by non-relatives (i.e. other families that have bought flats in the Spanish Apartments). This family space is quite novel and certainly a departure from the norm. Such a space therefore opens out on to a range of alternative family and non-family spacings. I will focus on two that are connected: firstly, a set of new materialities, and secondly, a set of novel non-kin social

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<sup>6</sup> In Palestine, land usually passes from a father to his children. Male heirs will receive a 2/3 share while female heirs will receive 1/3 share. Hence a rapidly expanding population leads to smaller plot sizes. This system maybe complicated, as is frequently the case in Birzeit, by relatives who have moved abroad and may sell their share to relatives who remain living in the village. While many locals suggested that land would rarely be sold in the past, it has become a valuable commodity in the present.



relations. As I will argue, these intimate spacings are indicative of social changes that can be apprehended through an expanded geopolitical analytic, but in other ways elude this same episteme.

### ***New material spacings of family***

Waleed: As I said before I think it was a good idea [to build the Spanish Apartments], but now with so many people and so many children, if you want to sleep after work, you can't because you hear someone playing in the street. If you tell him to stop playing and go home, maybe his father will get angry with you. This isn't a major problem. We had a meeting for all the buildings and we said, you should let your kids play from four to eight, because then if someone wants to sleep, he can sleep. It's good, but it's not very good.

Interviewer: Because there are a lot of children?

Waleed: Yes, and it's a small place. We need a garden and more things for the kids to do. We need more space for the cars. For instance if someone has a car and his wife also has one, where can you park the car? <sup>7</sup>

The above quotation gives some sense of the ways in which Waleed's living space is entwined with a set of concomitant practices of other people's families (i.e. non-kin relations). For example, his sleeping habits are related not only to the noise children make, but also the relationships that exist between the children, their parents and Waleed. Since these sorts of non-kin relations are unusual in this context, Waleed experiences them as problems. He diagnoses these changing geographies in very material ways, including the need for garden and car space. While such processes can be connected with broader shifts from horizontal to vertical living, themselves wrapped up in a dynamic of

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<sup>7</sup> The interview with Waleed was conducted in a local restaurant (in Birzeit), in Arabic with the assistance of a translator, on 7th August 2006. Due to social norms, it was not possible for me to interview women alone, and hence the arguments I make in this essay draw on and reflect male perspectives or the perspectives of married couples speaking together. Hence one of the most significant limitations of my research was that I was not able to explore the gendered dynamics of kinship. While Jean-Klein (2001, 2003) explores this issue during the first *intifada*, further contemporary study is needed in the wake of the second *intifada*.

population expansion and territorial contraction, the changes also result from more intimate family geographies, such as Waleed's ability to negotiate with other fathers. An even more explicit example of these new material spacings of family occurs when Waleed has to go shopping.

Waleed: I live on the top floor and since I have children it's a very big problem. As I said it would be easier if we had a lift. When it was just me and my wife it wasn't a problem. We could just go and buy something from the supermarket and take it home. But now you can't carry shopping and your kids at the same time. It's very hard. They promised to build an elevator, but as I said, if I had a small apartment of my own, I would leave the Spanish flats now.

As Waleed's family has changed, after his children's birth, his practices of family have also had to adapt. Even a banal practice like going to the supermarket and carrying shopping home – the closest supermarket is in the same apartment complex – must be renegotiated. This in turn has cultivated a desire, in concert with other things like the noise and increasing rent, to live elsewhere. Changing (family) practices and materials, caused by a change in the specific family subject, promotes the desire to change family spaces. However, this is a desire that is becoming increasingly difficult to realize due to increasing land costs and declining plot sizes.

Waleed: I have some [land] along Jifna Street and we have some below the municipality, that's our land, not mine. It belongs to my father and his brothers. My father is one of six brothers. And then, if you want to let someone take a small piece, for instance my father has one thousand six hundred dunams [1 dunam = 1000m<sup>2</sup>, and so given the size of Birzeit, I assume Waleed meant to say 1.6 dunams], and I have two brothers, I'll get three hundred meters. What can I do with that?

Palestinians living in the contemporary West Bank are confronting similar tensions between a desire for an ideal home (defined as house) and the messy negotiations

involved in living in an actually existing home (Harker 2009b). Indeed, it is perhaps analogous to similar processes elsewhere (Blunt and Dowling 2006). In this context, this tension and its roots in a more extensive dynamic of shrinking land-growing population points to the ways in which geopolitical processes can be explored and analyzed through/as home spaces (Harker 2009b), or as I argue in this paper family spacings. This is also true of emerging social spacings of family.

### ***New social spacings of family***

Waleed's story about children's noise and disturbed sleep includes a reference to a residence meeting in which 'quiet times' were agreed on. This is one of the ways in which new material spacings of family in the Spanish Apartments are entwined with a series of social-spatial relations that differ from those found in more normative 'family' dwellings.

Waleed: Every building has a small committee. They collect the money to pay for the electricity, for maintenance, for the cleaner. Just for these things. We have a big committee for big problems. If someone has a problem, each building, A, B, D, sends three people, and they form a small organization. This is for problems, to help someone with their problem.

Interviewer: What would be an example of problem? Like, with the kids playing is that a problem?

Waleed: I would speak with someone if my kids hit someone. I'm talking about big problems, such as strangers coming into our flats. If someone leaves his wife and somebody from outside comes in. And whenever we have problem with water, in summer we don't have water, some days we do, some days we don't, so we had a committee to solve the water problem.

Governing children, women and water become sites of a broader social negotiation, situational improvisation and occasionally conflict that blur familial and non-familial

spacings in and around the Spanish Apartments. The formation of an apartment committee bears a strong resemblance to the emergence of popular committees in refugee camps (Rosenfeld 2004). These committees appeared after the *nakba* (catastrophe) in 1948, to organize and administer the social and political life of camps in the absence of more formal structures of governance. Similar committees were formed in villages during the first *intifada* to organize resistance (Jean-Klein 2003), and continue to exist in villages along the Green Line that are resisting the construction of the Israeli Occupation barrier. All of these self/local governance movements can be tied to a lack of Palestinian political representation within the Occupied Territories prior to 1994, when the Palestinian Authority (PA) was formed. Even after this date, weak and largely ineffective ‘national’ governance has meant local governance is a necessity (even if such governance doesn’t seek to replace national governance aspirations, see Jean-Klein 2003). While similar forms of governance have emerged in a number of contexts throughout the world (see for example Simone 2010), what is significant in this case, is that this model of governance has been adopted by residences of the Spanish Apartments to deal with issues that in other Palestinian contexts are addressed by and within families. In other words, geopolitical processes and quotidian family practices and spacings are interconnected.

However, the reworking of existing (governance) resources and emerging forms and spaces of social and familial practice in the Spanish Apartments are also interspersed with more enduring family practices. Waleed mentioned that he still spends a great deal of time with his parents and brothers – the location of our interview was in a restaurant opposite his families’ building – and he still expresses a normatively-infused desire to build a single family home or have a domestic residence away from other families.

Waleed: [I]f I had a small apartment of my own, I would leave the Spanish flats now.

Interviewer: So are you planning on getting a small apartment?

Waleed: Yes, I don't want to spend all my life there. I'm thirty years old now. I have an idea at this stage of my life to build a small apartment [house], with two bedrooms, one kitchen, one bathroom, small. When I have money, I'll do it.

## **Palestinian families, the Israeli Occupation and geopolitics**

The empirical observations made in the previous section are quite prosaic and may even seem unremarkable. They certainly provide a marked contrast with accounts of Palestine marked by violence and the Israeli Occupation. It is of course possible to stage a discussion of Palestinian families along these lines by focusing on things such as the forced deportation of families and individuals, and the destruction of homes resided in by the families of suicide bombers. Jean-Klein's (2003) research also illustrates the continuity between popular committee activism and kinship relations during the first *intifada*. These forms of Politics and violence often overshadow the much more extensive, banal and quotidian forms and acts of violence. I have already suggested that the Israeli Occupation plays a role, either directly or indirectly, in the transition from horizontal to vertical living and apartment governance. Another response to mundane and quotidian experiences of violence is migration. One of the reasons why the Spanish Apartments were built was to prevent out-migration by young Christians<sup>8</sup>.

Waleed: The diocese went to the Spanish government to tell them they want to build a building for young people, as I said before, because they didn't want us to go. They needed us in this country. They told him we need some land. The church said, we have some land, and they needed one hundred fifty thousand dollars up front to begin.

It is estimated that in the period October 2000 to June 2001, 150,000 Palestinians left the West Bank and moved to Jordan (Zureik 2003). From 2000 to 2006, 50,000 Palestinians applied to foreign consulates to emigrate from Palestine (Makdisi 2008: 8). Sofer's description of this migration as 'voluntary transfer' (Makdisi 2008: 9-10) willfully

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<sup>8</sup> While Birzeit is a 'Christian village' – local estimates suggest 60% of the population are Christian, with the remaining 40% Muslim – the analysis of migration in this paragraph is not limited to Christians.

ignores the causes of such mobility, many of which involve military and bureaucratic violence against Palestinians<sup>9</sup> (see also Graham 2002, Zureik 2003, Harker 2009a). Motivating factors include the difficulty of building a home due to declining living space, itself a result of land theft and subsequent increases in costs for land purchase and home construction as discussed earlier in the paper. The relatively excessive costs associated with building a home in Palestine are exacerbated by what Roy (2007) terms economic de-development (which has caused a long-term decline in incomes and capital savings). In addition to these effects of occupation-related violence on Palestinian families, the very definition of what constitutes a Palestinian family has itself been the object of geopolitical dispute and violence. During the Oslo negotiations,

A key definitional problem cropped up which remains unresolved to this day, that is, what constitutes a ‘family’? Israel, for example, insisted that ‘family’ implies a nuclear-type family, and for the purpose of family unification the children must be below the age of 16, whereas the Palestinian negotiators stressed that according to Arab culture and practice, a family encompasses immediate and extended members. It is clear that each definition impacts the number and category of displaced family members, if and when they are allowed to return home. (Zureik 2001: 219).

It is clear from the examples given thus far that families do not stand outside or apart from geopolitical processes. It is possible to focus on Waleed’s desires and frustrations in order to trace the ways in which geopolitical processes are experienced and embodied in the course of everyday Palestinian life in the Occupied Territories, whether through lack of sleep or climbing numerous flights of stairs. However, the families and family spaces/ings I encountered during my research were never explicitly practiced as forms of resistance to the Israeli Occupation. Rather, these family practices constitute part of a micropolitics of living that ‘deals with’, rather than ‘resists’, the Israeli Occupation. The phrase ‘dealing with’ conceptualizes practices that must encounter the Occupation, but

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<sup>9</sup>“‘Transfer’ is a concept that has a long and established history in Israel; it is a euphemism referring to the removal or expulsion of the indigenous, non-Jewish, population of Palestine’ (Makdisi 2008: 10).

aren't explicitly carried out as forms of resistance to this incredibly extensive set of power relations. This notion of dealing with is similar to Allen's (2008: 456) concept of 'getting by', her answer to the question:

How can we acknowledge the power of violence in Israel's colonial project in the occupied territories without either assuming it to be all-determining of Palestinian experience, or championing every act of Palestinian survival to be heroic resistance?

While Allen's term 'getting by' refers to practices that have emerged specifically in response to the violence of the Israeli Occupation, I use the term dealing with because the family space/ings I have examined emerge from longer standing socio-cultural practices that predate the Israeli Occupation, even as current manifestations must take place amidst it. I think this is important to emphasize, because it envisions Palestinian lives and spaces as more than just a reaction to, and thus beyond the singular ontic of, the Israeli Occupation. These *powerful* social and cultural practices - that a geopolitical episteme struggles to attend to - frequently get written out of analyses of Palestine, even as they are vital to the creation of this place and various politically inflected practices therein.

Therefore, one of the concrete implications of thinking alongside Palestinian families as they deal with and get by the Occupation has been how I represent this place. I focus on family practices and spaces in *Palestine*. Although what is signified by the noun Palestine is rather ambiguous, its use is a deliberate attempt to distance Palestine from the more commonly used noun construct Palestine/Israel. This noun construct is very important, since it marks the numerous ways in which Palestinian lives have been (forcibly) entangled with Israeli lives, particularly through ongoing colonial occupation. However, I argue that an analysis of distinctly Palestinian family practices allows for the articulation of a *more* autonomous time-space: Palestine. In this instance, Palestine becomes a performative utterance that acknowledges the relatedness of Palestinian spaces to Israeli spaces in a whole host of (largely inequitably) ways, but nevertheless attempts to reconfigure those relations. While such a maneuver is largely rhetorical, it gains force

from the materialities of specific family spaces and spacings. In other words, this epistemological translation (from Israel/Palestine to Palestine) is routed through changing intimate relations embodied in particular family practices. Waleed's family spaces/ings are new to a certain extent, but also emerge from longer standing, normative practices and discourses of family that stretch beyond Israeli colonization in both time and space.

Of course, increasing distance and detachment can take a number of forms, not all of which are politically progressive, or necessarily actual forms of disengagement. Abourahme (2009) has recently argued that the 'bubble' of urban modernity that surrounds Ramallah and its region is another effect of colonial occupation, and specifically Israel's efforts to destroy a coherent Palestinian *national* political community. 'Ramallah the bubble, Ramallah the enclave is also Ramallah the Bantustan, even if it doesn't always feel like it' (Ibid: 503). This cautionary note not only serves to highlight the importance of understanding the place in and from which Waleed's family spaces/ings emerge (see also Taraki 2008), but also helps clarify my argument: what the performative utterance Palestine seeks is a particular type of distance and disconnection, that uncouples (rather than simply ignores) Palestinian lives from Israeli Occupation.

## Conclusion

While it is vital to analyze and unpack the Israeli Occupation, the reasons for doing so, at least to my mind, are as part of a broader effort to assist Palestinians in ending the Occupation. Many critical geographers seek to practice this sort of modest solidarity scholarship through their research, teaching and activism. However, doing so by focusing only on geographies of Politics and violence presents a series of dangers. In this context, these include producing Palestine as a land hollowed out of Palestinians, and frequently ignoring the ways in which Palestinian refugees and diaspora living outside the Occupied Territories are affected by such violence. Faced with this challenge, I have argued that more cosmopolitan representations of place in general (Robinson 2003), and Palestine in particular, can be intellectually and politically productive. This is not an argument for fewer geopolitical studies of Palestine and areas like it. Such studies have offered many things, including efforts to re-envision the boundaries, territories and states, (see the



special issue of the Arab World Geographer 2005), and the production of more affirmative representations of ‘Others’ that simultaneously critique and bridge discourses that separate ‘Us’ from ‘Them’ (see Gregory 2004, Abu Zahra 2006). Rather, a greater range of (geographical) analyses can broaden the terrain on which a politics of solidarity is enacted. Exploring family spaces and spacings in Palestine through a different analytic register demonstrates that such families, while intertwined with the Israeli Occupation and the practices of the Palestinian Authority, aren’t solely determined by these spatial (and temporal) political entities. Hence while these familial practices *deal with* living under occupation, this involves a series of power relations that are not necessarily violent, aren’t experienced by Palestinians as forms of ‘politics’ (i.e. ‘resistance’), and do not cohere around the territorial spaces and practices of nation-states (and nation-state like entities). Furthermore, as Benvenisti (2008: n.p.) points out, discussions and negotiations around a one or two state ‘solutions’ to the Israel/Palestine ‘conflict’ will do nothing to address ‘the dramatic gap in gross domestic product per capita between Palestinians and Israelis, which is 1:10 in the West Bank and 1:20 in the Gaza Strip, as well as the enormous inequality in the use of natural resources (land, water)’. The complexity of assessing and addressing such social and economic changes is precisely the reason why critical scholarship must be based on multiple approaches to apprehending place(s), that are much more than simply sites of Politics and violence. Such approaches may include an expanded geopolitics (Hyndman 2007), which might even be called subaltern geopolitics, but this analytic alone is insufficient for the reasons outlined above.

More generally, there is a danger that (critical) geopolitical scholarship fails to heed Foucault’s (1983: xiv) maxim: ‘do not become enamored of power’<sup>10</sup>. One contemporary reworking of this caveat can be found in Butler’s critique of work that has become fixated with sovereign exceptionality.

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<sup>10</sup> Along the same lines, I also note that Foucault’s work – which has become axiomatic for understanding power – never intended to provide a general theory of power, but rather a set of *situated* investigations into power’s application in various contexts.

First the analysis of these mechanisms of power that we began some years ago, and are continuing with now, is not in any way a general theory of what power is. It is not a part or even the start of such a theory. This analysis simply involves investigating where and how, between whom, between what points, according to what processes, and with what effects, power is applied. (Foucault 2007: 1-2)

It is one thing to trace the logic of how constitutionalism secures the rights of the sovereign to suspect constitutional protections, but it is quite another to install this logic as the exclusive way in which to apprehend the workings of contemporary power. If our attention is captured by the lure of the arbitrary decisionism of the sovereign, then we risk inscribing that logic as necessary and forgetting what prompted this inquiry to begin with: the massive problem of statelessness and the demand to find post-national forms of political opposition that might begin to address the problem with some efficacy. (Butler in Butler & Spivak 2007: 41).

Butler's critique emphasizes the dangers of focusing on particular relations of power in the context of statelessness (something that resonates very strongly with many Palestinian experiences). Through my discussion of family practices and the ways in which they are not wholly attendant on (as in attend to, be attentive to) the Israeli Occupation, I hope this paper has similarly shown the potential for alternative types of engagement in this context and the reasons for pursuing a more variegated geographical and geopolitical scholarship.

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